

Essential Elements for Long-Term Success

Everyone has their favorite season of the year. School children and their teachers anxiously await the beginning of summer. Those who avidly pursue the whitetail deer long for the turning of the leaves and the cooler weather soon to follow. Goat breeders impatiently count the days until spring kidding begins. For some, the period from buck turnout until kidding commences rivals the length of the school year as perceived by a child. Spring brings new life and a first glimpse of the results of a carefully planned mating program – breeding the best to the best with great expectations of producing something better.

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The meat goat industry continues to boom. The value of imported genetics has declined and stabilized at “real world” prices, but the interest and activity within the industry is far from status quo. Breeding stock inquiries, both domestic and international, continue to surface and the youth market wether industry has experienced growth unlike any other youth livestock program in the memorable past.

A diversity of opportunities exists; purebred seedstock, commercial replacement animals, show wethers and the list goes on. In order to experience long-term success, meat goat producers must focus on four determinants of success in a livestock enterprise. These four fundamentals must be considered in their order of priority.

#1. You must have a VIABLE MARKET for your product.

A lack thereof precludes consideration of points 2-4. Webster defines viable as capable of developing under favorable conditions; capable of success or continuing effectiveness. Synonyms include: alive, feasible, practical, workable. When used in context with goat markets, terms such as accessible, stable and dependable also come to mind.

Unlike most other animal protein industries, demand for goats and goat meat far exceeds our domestic ability to supply. In some instances, demand escapes the realm of viable markets. How? Look back at the synonyms; practical, feasible, workable. Our supply is sporadic and we are some distance from being able to fill long-term monthly requests for 10-15,000 goats or 35-40,000 pounds of meat. We need not forget the existence of these markets. However, in the short-term, conditions are not favorable for their development (limited supply) so we must press on in other areas.

Parallel to Ponder: A neighborhood lemonade stand offers little relief to a convoy of soldiers in mid-July.

#2. Market price must exceed COST OF PRODUCTION.

We must focus on the cost of production, not market prices.

What is a good price?

A.: It depends. In this discussion, it is assumed good and profitable are synonymous. If so, a good price is an amount greater than the cost of production on an equal unit basis (i.e. \$/cwt, ¢/lb, \$/head).

B. It differs across operations. Seldom could one find two meat goat operations with an identical cost of production. Therefore, neighbors discussing the market across the fence is a little ambiguous without inclusion of costs of production.

C. It is relative to the current cost of production not historical or projected market data. Most of the costs associated with producing a commercial kid are incurred by its dam: major categories include land, labor, feed and vet/health. Land and labor tend to be fixed costs while feed (including hay and cultivated forage production) and vet/health costs are more variable. The cost of doing business goes up a little each year and with each subsequent kid crop. Characterization of the price received (good or bad) implies consideration of the expense incurred to produce the product marketed.

Parallel to Ponder: It matters not that gross income from a group of 40 lb kids is \$40 per head IF it cost \$45 per head to produce and market them. Subsequent experiences of similar magnitude will jeopardize long-term enterprise profitability/success.

#3. The goal for REPRODUCTIVE PERFORMANCE is at least one merchantable unit per exposed female.

Brood does in a meat goat operation are the production

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units. The costs associated with their production or purchase and their maintenance cost (supplemental feed, hay, vet/health, equipment, facilities, etc.) represent a major portion of the cost incurred in the production of meat goats. Breeding age does generate income to offset these annual costs in one of two ways: 1) through sale of their offspring or, 2) the sale of barren/non-productive females.

The relationship between reproductive performance and the break-even price required to cover production costs is demonstrated in Table 1. *Note: The true measure of reproductive performance is (% kid crop = # kids weaned/# does exposed to a buck).* NOT # kids weaned/# does present at weaning.

An admirable goal for an extensive production system (goats grazing larger native range, brushy or wooded pastures) would be 150% or 1.5 kids weaned for every doe bred. On the other hand, most profitable intensive production systems (does in small pens or paddocks, being fed from a sack or bale) average 175 to 200% kid crops annually.

Parallel to Ponder: Should one doubt the significance of overlooking reproductive performance in a goat enterprise, take a brief look at the Angora industry in the absence of incentive payments.

#4. Match GENETIC POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH with productivity of the environment.

Big, stout, fast-growing, thick-muscled, heavy-boned, eye-appealing kids - certainly an admirable goal high on the list

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TABLE 1.

Relationship Between Cost of Production and Reproductive Performance

Doe Cost \$/hd/yr.	Kid Crop Weaned-----						
	70%	80%	90%	100%	125%	150%	200%
Break-even Price, \$/lb*							
10.....	0.32	0.28	0.25	0.22	0.18	0.15	0.11
15.....	0.48	0.42	0.37	0.333	0.27	0.22	0.17
20.....	0.63	0.56	0.49	0.44	0.36	0.30	0.22
25.....	0.79	0.69	0.62	0.56	0.44	0.37	0.28
30.....	0.95	0.83	0.74	0.67	0.53	0.44	0.3
35.....	1.11	0.97	0.86	0.78	0.62	0.52	0.39
40.....	1.27	1.11	0.99	0.89	0.71	0.59	0.44
45.....	1.43	1.25	1.11	1.00	0.80	0.67	0.50
50.....	1.59	1.39	1.23	1.11	0.89	0.74	0.56
60.....	1.90	1.67	1.48	1.33	1.07	0.89	0.67

*Assumed market weight: 45 lb. Does bred to kid once a year.

of most meat goat producers. Why then, is it last in this prioritized list of four? Because a viable market, low cost of production and efficient reproduction are more critical to the long term success of a meat goat operation than how "good" the kids look.

In the environments where meat goats have a competitive advantage (native ranges, brush, etc.) and the lowest cost of production, genetic potential for growth is usually not the first limiting factor for growth. Nutrient availability is typically the first limiting factor for growth.

In order to optimize production efficiency, meat goats, especially replacement females, should be selected under the conditions in which they will be expected to produce. Optimum nutritional conditions (ad libitum feeding, generous supplementation or grazing warm/cool season annual forages) favor an animal with later maturity, larger mature size and greater genetic potential for growth than can be supported by the browse, forbs and grasses available in most pastures. Successful beef producers do not select their replacement heifers at the feedlot. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned therein.

Parallel to Ponder: The distance a rocket can travel is directly related to the fuel beneath it.

SUMMARY

The future of the U.S. meat goat industry is exciting. The challenge of supplying high quality goat meat to an ever increasing population that prefers goat over other animal proteins is significant and its magnitude unique. The consumer is patiently waiting at the meat counter with cash in one hand. The challenge - putting goat meat in the other for less than what they are willing to pay. 🍴

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